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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000633

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SUBJECT: MGLE01: SINIORA ON THE PRESIDENCY, DIALOGUE, AND
"BLACK SHEEP"

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) In a March 1 meeting at the Grand Serail, Prime Minister Siniora and the Ambassador discussed UNSCR 1559, the National Dialogue and the Lebanese presidency. Siniora said that the National Dialogue's discussion on 1559 would prompt serious debate on issues including Hizballah's arms and the fate of the presidency. Siniora said that 1559 ultimately had the same goals as Ta'if and that if cooler heads prevailed, the National Dialogue's forum on 1559 would be a positive development. Siniora said that the two other agenda items for the Dialogue, the UNIIIC investigation and relations with Syria, were "nonissues," as Lebanon's political chiefs are already at a consensus on these topics. Turning again to the issue of the presidency, Siniora suggested that Syria would be willing to cut its losses and give up President Emile Lahoud, but only at the price of naming his successor. He said that Damascus favors Riad Salameh, but that Charles Rizk or Michel Edde would be acceptable "interim presidents" for Damascus as well. Siniora argued that Nassib Lahoud was clearly the best candidate, but expressed doubts about his ability to win Baabda Palace in the face of Aounist and Syrian opposition. Siniora reaffirmed that Egypt and Saudi Arabia would be important strategic allies in carrying out his reform agenda, but he was concerned about Lebanon's image in the Arab world, and given regional sympathy towards Syria, worried about becoming the Arab world's "black sheep." END SUMMARY

PROSPECTS FOR DIALOGUE:
1559 LOOMS LARGE

12. (C) On March 1, the Ambassador and emboff called on Prime Minister Siniora at the Grand Serail, while outside Lebanese security forces worked to cordon off Solidere and the area around Parliament in preparation for the Nabih Berri's National Dialogue. Siniora was relaxed as he described the prospects for that evening's cabinet meeting with President Lahoud and the approaching National Dialogue. He bemoaned the fact that Berri was holding the Dialogue in Parliament and shutting down the entire business district in Solidere to erect a security perimeter. "This," Siniora said, "wouldn't have been my choice for a location." He seemed sanguine,

however, on the prospects for the Dialogue itself, but said that of the three scheduled agenda items, the UNIIIC investigation, relations with Syria, and UNSCR 1559, only the later would provoke any serious debate. "UNIIIC: we all support it. Relations with Syria: we all want good relations with Syria based on mutual respect. No one is going to disagree with that. We already have a consensus," the prime minister said.

13. (C) Siniora said the discussion on UNSCR 1559, however, would be serious, and would raise the issues of Hizballah's weapons and the Lebanese presidency. He thought it possible, if not likely, that the assembled political leaders would come to a consensus on ousting Lahoud, which they would have to implement by one of three tactics: 1) a new constitutional amendment, 2) street demonstrations, and 3) continued political pressure inside the Beirut beltway. Siniora dismissed the first two options as unfeasible or outright dangerous, and said the third option was the most likely way to get rid of Lahoud. He speculated that Lahoud himself is exhausted and ready to go, and described Lahoud's recent open letter to a Lebanese newspaper accusing the Siniora government of organizing the February 5 Achrafieh riots as "high treason" and "the climax of stupidity."

14. (C) Siniora also suggested that Syria is also eager to cut the dead weight of Emile Lahoud, albeit at the right price. When the Ambassador asked what price Syria was looking for, Siniora replied, "Names. There are some that have already been linked. (Central Bank Governor) Riad Salameh at the top, maybe (Minister of Justice Charles) Rizk, or Michel Edde as interim presidents." Siniora described the option for an interim president as a "recipe for instability." The Ambassador agreed, noting that it could only result in paralysis at best. Siniora said he'd discussed the issue of an interim president with French Ambassador Bernard Emie, and that the French are against it

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as well.

15. (C) Siniora identified Nassib Lahoud as the only "real choice," for the presidency, the only candidate with the international standing, statesmanlike demeanor, and principled moral integrity to serve Lebanon well as president. He pointed to Nassib Lahoud's positive relationship with the Saudis as a bonus for Lebanon, and as a boost in his chances of winning the Baabda Palace. Siniora said that no matter who the candidate was, however, Egyptian and Saudi endorsement would probably be necessary to calm discontent among the legion Maronite "would be" presidents, and to give the new president a much needed patina of legitimacy in the Arab world. Otherwise, the prime minister explained, fellow Arabs may view the new President, and by extension Lebanon itself, as accomplices in the U.S. led persecution of sister Syria.

REDEEMING THE BLACK SHEEP

16. (C) "We'll be the black sheep of the Arab world," Siniora cautioned. "Nobody hears our side. Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya portray Syria as the victim. A significant majority of the Arab world is against us." All the more important, he advised, that Egypt and Saudi support Lebanon through the difficult issues of the National Dialogue and important reform initiatives. In the meantime, he stressed the importance of continuing the dialogue and keeping the council of ministers united and functional.
FELTMAN